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ABSTRACT

This paper presents personal reflections on factors in the preservation and stabilization of North American indigenous languages. All indigenous languages in North America are in danger of being lost. Linguistic and cultural minority communities must control the institutions that affect their lives if there is to be significant and sustainable improvement in their circumstances. While community control is vital to the stabilization of indigenous languages, development of community control and recruitment of human resources are often complicated by conflicting goals and agenda. Some of these complications are illustrated through examples of indigenous control over schools in Canada and control over indigenous language development in general in Yukon Territory. Another factor in strategy development is size: the size of a language group as a whole, the size of each community involved in language preservation, the amount the language is used in the group or community, and the number of kinds of situations that exist for using the language. Preservation strategies must combine questions of size with questions of control, and outsiders must be prepared to accept that some communities, especially the smallest ones, will have other priorities than language preservation or revival. Local priorities must be respected. In addition, local leadership must be fostered, the forces that create negativity must be met with healing, and recent accomplishments must be appreciated. Contains 15 references. (Author/SV)

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Personal Thoughts on Indigenous Language Stabilization

Barbara Burnaby

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Jon Reyhner

This paper describes the author's personal, intuitive reflection on her observations concerning factors in the preservation and stabilization of indigenous languages in North America. Issues explored include the complications that conflicting goals and agendas bring to the development of community control, the recruiting of human resources and motivating community action, and the small size of crucial communities and language groups overall and in specific contexts. We need to develop the right strategies for different size language communities, and we need to pay attention to the amount and variety of language use actually going on in communities. Local priorities must be respected; local leadership must be fostered; the forces that create negativity must be met with healing; and recent accomplishments must be appreciated.

Before coming to the Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium, I reviewed the work of the previous symposia on stabilizing indigenous languages (Cantoni, 1996). What a wonderful opportunity it is to read, all in one book, about such a broad range of issues relating to indigenous languages! Work on these matters has been terribly scattered and divided by great distances, national boundaries, and other barriers. Therefore, it is very satisfying to see the results of the meeting of so many committed minds—overviews, documentation of successes, priorities, frankness, and dedication. It is an honor to take part in this groundbreaking work.

What I have to say is a rather intuitive and loosely connected exploration of several observations that I have made over a number of years concerning indigenous language activities in Canada. It draws and reflects on the work of these symposia, other sources, and my own experience to highlight certain facets of the complex dynamic of indigenous language use. The clearest thing about indigenous languages in North America is that they are all in danger of being lost, some sooner than later. If they are to be preserved and stabilized, we need some strategies for deciding on the most important things to do. I am not presenting a plan here, but I am raising some issues that might be used to make one. The main theme concerns the idea of the need for a critical mass of people and their activities in order for a social movement to take place. This theme is related here to the priority placed on local control of social institutions and the role of individuals in social movements. Other themes of leadership and negativity are woven in as well.

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Community control

Many influential social scientists, including my colleagues David Corson (e.g., 1990), Stacy Churchill (1986), and James Cummins (e.g., 1988), emphasize the need for linguistic and cultural minority communities to control institutions that affect their lives if there is to be significant and sustainable improvement in their circumstances in the midst of the power of the majority population. I want to consider some aspects of this kind of control in practice. Let me begin by saying that I am thoroughly committed to the principle of community control and cannot imagine any meaningful progress towards the stabilization of indigenous languages without this principle being addressed more than any other. However, as Dr. Fishman has said about generalizations about language in society on various occasions, it is a little more complicated than that. In other words and for example, what kinds of control are the most important and under what conditions? Are there circumstances where it is practical and even useful for control to be shared? Should control over everything be approached at once, or should some areas be dealt with first? And so on.

The crucial question is what control is and how much of what kind of control makes a difference, especially to indigenous language maintenance. Unfortunately, the collection of relevant information in Canada about what kinds of control indigenous peoples now have and how it has worked to make changes is complicated by the facts, among others, that there are many different institutions and jurisdictions involved and that we do not really know what the right questions are to ask. Serious, detailed discussions of what indigenous control in Canada means and how well it is progressing have been undertaken (e.g., MacPherson, 1991), and it appears that the picture is not very satisfactory. Let us look at a few aspects of control.

In Canada, indigenous peoples have, for many years, been firm in their insistence that they get institutional control. They started with the matter of control over schooling. Perhaps the most influential document by Canadian indigenous people, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, was written in 1972 by the National Indian Brotherhood in response to a federal government proposal that the Indian Act be abolished and that indigenous peoples be treated like all other citizens. The National Indian Brotherhood stated that the federal government must retain its existing funding obligations for services, particularly education, to indigenous peoples but that control over those services be given to those affected by the services, in this case the parents of indigenous schoolchildren. An important point in this statement was that the goals of education were to be both the reinforcement and enhancement of indigenous children's identity as indigenous people and the learning of skills to make a good living in the wider society. With this double objective, which is still strongly upheld in indigenous communities in Canada in the 1990s, indigenous education is obliged to draw on both the mainstream and indigenous traditions.

A somewhat different example relates to complex negotiations between the Canadian federal government and the Yukon Territory concerning the application of the federal Official Languages Act (which makes English and French

the official languages of Canada) and the role of the Yukon indigenous languages. It was decided that the indigenous languages would not be made official languages, but that they would receive comparable financial support. The rationale for this decision was that community self-determination of language policies and initiatives was a more effective priority than the kinds of actions that territory-wide official language status would likely produce (Cottingham & Tousignant, 1991, as quoted in Fettes, in press). In other words, the treatment of the indigenous languages would not be at all constrained by mainstream models of how an official language ought to be. Therefore, in this case, the issues relate directly to the indigenous tradition only.

In the two examples I just gave of indigenous control over schools in Canada and control over indigenous language development in general in the Yukon Territory, there is a difference in the extent to which mainstream ideas and administration are involved. In the school case, parents want to meet mainstream objectives as well as indigenous ones. This means that community control must include not only doing what the community wants but also doing what mainstream authorities expect. No doubt there are decisions taken every day where teachers, parents, and administrators have to choose between various traditionally-oriented or mainstream-oriented possibilities. Schooling is not the only community institution where these kinds of decisions and compromises have to be made. Health care, social work, law enforcement, and many other institutions are often in the same situation. In very few cases can people just decide to do things, such as indigenous language maintenance in the Yukon, without having to take into account mainstream models. The point I want to make here is that community/indigenous control over mainstream types of institutions in the community is not a simple matter of handing over control to local people to make the decisions that non-indigenous people used to make. Over and over, choices have to be made in order to change institutions from mainstream ones to truly indigenous ones.

I was at a meeting once where indigenous people had come in from many communities to discuss indigenous language development. We brainstormed a wide range of ideas of things that might be done in schools, at community events, in the store, out on the land, and in many other ways. After we had made a good list of possibilities, I found it frustrating that the conversation immediately turned to which of these things could and could not be done because of the constraints of the different kinds of funding available. In my view, mainstream structures that provided the funding were taking control over the decisions we were trying to make. No one was talking about finding alternative sources of funding, lobbying to have funding rules altered, or figuring out which things could be done with community resources and little extra cost. I have described this event as an example, to my mind, of the many ways in which it is difficult to get real control over situations and institutions even if local people are in charge of them.

Even in situations such as indigenous language maintenance and development in the Yukon, which is not modeled on mainstream ways of doing things,

there are important issues to deal with. In being given control, local people have to take control. But, how do we get people involved and committed to act? Can we convince people in the community that indigenous languages are high enough priority for them to change the ways they do things? How do we get the resources needed—the human resources of people's knowledge, skills, and time and the practical resources of money and things? Actually using an indigenous language does not cost money, but it often takes money and/or energy and time to encourage people to use it. Once things are moving, how do we keep people involved and changing? In my experience, there is a great deal of talk about how important indigenous languages are. Non-indigenous people have been notorious for making speeches and promises about such things and then not doing anything about them. But indigenous people have not been perfect in this respect either. If indigenous people do not act, then who will? Indigenous control has to do with getting both indigenous and non-indigenous people to act on their words rather than letting things slide along as usual because the usual way is most often in the direction of the mainstream way.

One more point I want to make here concerns indigenous control not just in communities where indigenous people are in the majority in their home communities, but where indigenous people live in places where they are in the (often small) minority. In Canada, it seems that as much as half of the indigenous population lives outside of traditional indigenous communities (Statistics Canada, 1993). We need to think about indigenous control in all the kinds of places where the indigenous population is. Also, it is only practical to think about getting non-indigenous people to cooperate in achieving indigenous objectives. Kirkness (1992) indicates that there are more indigenous programs in schools in which all or most of the children are indigenous and/or where the schools are administered by school boards and governments which are indigenously controlled. However, she also gives examples of indigenously oriented programs that are in schools run by regular school boards and governments and in schools where the indigenous children are in the minority. It is important that we keep in mind the potential of enlisting non-indigenous people and groups in creating programs and activities that support indigenous interests. This strategy may not seem to be a good one in principle, or it may seem hopeless, but if it is not followed up it seems likely that a very large portion of indigenous people will not be reached. Given the risk that many indigenous languages and cultures are at, all the indigenous people who do not live in indigenous communities cannot be ignored.

The factor of critical mass

Critical mass means having enough people or language or activity so that the things we want start to happen and keep happening. I suggest that size of groups of people should be given careful attention in our considerations of where to put our energies in indigenous language support. Canada has about sixty indigenous languages (more or less, depending on how you count them), but only Cree, Ojibwa, and Inuktitut have more than 15,000 speakers. The other

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languages are mostly much smaller. We know that the smallest language groups have been most vulnerable to extinction, and that only 35 per cent of indigenous languages in Canada are in a strong position (Assembly of First Nations, 1990). Indeed, the size of the group of speakers and the degree of endangerment are almost the same thing. So in this central way, size of the group is an important factor when looking at where energies to support languages should be placed. We could decide to put more effort into working with languages that have the fewest speakers because they are the most at risk, or we could put more support into languages with the most speakers because they have the best prospects. But no one wants to make these decisions. I think that the more practical decision is to provide the right kind of help to the right size of language. Those languages that have few speakers, many of whom are older people, need a different kind of treatment to those which have a lot of speakers, including children. We must be realistic that the kinds of activities which are very effective in some situations are not the best for every situation. Especially when languages are really in danger, it is tempting to get on the bandwagon of every new language program. But we must choose carefully those programs and activities that are the most realistic and put more energy into them.

In addition to the size of the language group as a whole, it is useful to think about the size of each individual community we want to work in. In my experience, larger communities have a certain advantage over smaller communities in getting new and effective language support programs off the ground. They simply have more financial and human resources, more people and skills to choose from, and more people to volunteer to help. If small communities have taken over control of a lot of their institutions (schools, transportation, health, economic development, and so forth), their human resources may be stretched to the limit with these responsibilities. They can only make changes in so many of their activities at any one time. Also, they are likely to have pressures on them that make things other than language higher priority. So again, a program that works in a large community may not work out in the same way in a smaller one. On the other hand, small communities have certain advantages as well, so that some kinds of programs and activities might work better there than in large communities. At any rate, the size of communities needs to be taken into account in deciding on language promotion and support activities.

One other aspect of size I can think of is the amount that the indigenous language is used in any community or language group. In the Yukon Territory, the movement to develop, maintain, and preserve the indigenous languages has recognized the essential goal of creating a critical mass of real communication in the indigenous languages as the momentum for substantial change (Gardner, 1993, as quoted in Fettes, in press). In other words, there is probably an essential amount of language use, and if that amount of use goes below a certain point, the language will decline rapidly no matter how many people there are who know how to speak it. Because communication usually implies groups of people, we would be looking at communities rather than individuals in order to assess this critical mass or amount of language. I do not think anyone knows

how much communication in the language is enough to keep the language going, but it makes sense that a language has to be used a certain amount or it will die.

In this vein, Mougeon and Beniak (1994) indicate the importance of a critical mass of French speaking community institutions (social, cultural, and economic), or "institutional completeness," in French speaking communities in Ontario to the maintenance of the French language in an otherwise strongly English speaking province over long periods of time. In other words, people with French backgrounds need to be able to take part in a lot of things in French (such as school, church, sports, radio, shopping, and so forth) before they take the French language seriously and use it regularly. Again, without defining what actual size or proportion such a critical mass of language activity in community institutions might be, the implication is that a community would have to support a considerable range of established institutions in the indigenous language to benefit from this effect.

Overall then, we need to take into consideration the size of the language group, the size of the individual communities involved, the amount of communication that goes on in the language, and the number of kinds of situations that people can use the language in. If we are serious about working towards the stabilization of all the indigenous languages, we also have to combine the questions of size with the questions of control. I have not thought through what all the combinations might be or what they might mean. Besides, I think it is more useful to bring these ideas to issues in actual community situations than to work out all the theoretical possibilities here. However, below are some of the thoughts on my mind at the moment.

Differing priorities

We must be prepared to accept the fact that some communities and language groups, especially the smallest ones, may decide that they have other priorities than indigenous language maintenance or revival. We must be realistic about the stress their human resources are under as they are handed not only the control of but also the responsibility for institutions (formal education, transportation, economic activities, and so forth) that were once imposed on them from the outside. The pressure to meet the mainstream requirements of this work may not leave room for a focus on indigenous languages. As Fishman (1996) and Gardner (1993) emphasize, a good strategy is to focus on less formal, more intimate community institutions such as home, family, and friendship groups first and let other institutions such as the school follow suit. Even small communities and small language groups have families and social activities. Also, these aspects of life are in some ways more protected from mainstream control and interference. However, in such stressful times, it may be especially difficult to find the human resources in a community or language group of any size to take leadership in these areas. On the other hand, a community could decide to use its control of institutions such as the school in such a way as to change them to reflect strongly traditional linguistic and cultural

traditions. The problem with this approach is that indigenous parents are widely reported to want their children to be educated so that they can compete in the wider society. This might mitigate against any major changes in the organization of schooling and many other institutions. Hampton (1995) argues that the evolution towards true indigenous education goes through phases. Perhaps we may be overly impatient for the results we want.

Leadership

I want to change the focus at this point away from communities and language groups to individuals. The single most important factor I have seen in the development of successful indigenous language stabilization activities in Canada in the past thirty years has been the presence of leadership. Each exceptional program or movement has been started by a community member who had a vision of what could be done. This person was able not only to dream but also to inspire others to share in this dream. For a reason I do not understand, most of these leaders have been women, but I do not think that this is a reason to discourage men from working in the direction of indigenous language stabilization. I think of Roseanne Houle, Ida McLeod, Ida Wasacase, Verna Kirkness, Emma Jane Crate, Lena White, Mary Lou Fox, Greg Spence, Reg Henry, Dorothy Lazore, Sr. Catherine Tekakwitha, Luci Salt, Annie Whiskeychan, Mildred Millea, Bernie Francis, Beatrice Watt, and many others.

Local leadership in indigenous language development is important because it means that new ideas are coming from someone who understands the community well and therefore knows many of the complicated factors that could make an idea succeed or fail. The leader knows about local human resources—who is good at what and therefore who can contribute to new activities. Also, local leaders are very important in encouraging others to take part because leaders are role models. They show everyone that new things can be done, that it is not always necessary to import skills from the outside. Finally, they are from the community so they are likely to stay and see a project through to completion.

Unfortunately, we cannot force good leadership to happen. The right person has to come forward at the right time. However, it is certainly possible to encourage leadership in ourselves and those around us. People who have talents, especially young people, can be supported in using them. Opportunities for training and experience of all sorts can be used. People who make contributions should be rewarded and appreciated. New ideas can be tried out. Through such means, talents, resources, and opportunities are not wasted, and new, valuable things and activities are created, often at no cost.

Negativity

I suppose that the dark side of leadership is negativity in communities about what can be done and the sharing of talents and resources. In the book about the previous symposia (Cantoni, 1996), I was impressed that people were prepared to come out and face the fact that negativity has played a problematic role in the stabilizing of indigenous languages in North America. I have seen it at

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work myself, and I was sorry to see that it seems to be a factor in many other communities as well. I think, for example, of visiting a school in which an indigenous language is used extensively. At lunch one of the indigenous language teachers told me that she did not let any of the other teachers see the classroom materials she had prepared over the years because she had put a lot of work into them and she did not want anyone taking advantage of all her effort. In other situations, I have seen some parents make trouble over a new language program or criticize everything the language teacher does. Most often I have heard people say that they would like to learn or improve their skills in their indigenous language, but that they could not take the ridicule they got when they tried to speak. This kind of attitude and behavior is a very powerful force in creating the risk of extinction of indigenous languages, and acting to stop it is essential to the work of stabilizing indigenous languages.

I cannot believe that the people who do these negative things are all mean people. I have to think that they are acting out of some kind of pain or simple thoughtlessness. Some of the pain, we know all too well, has come out of the ugly and racist things that non-indigenous people have done to indigenous people over the years in schools, on reservations, at work, in hospitals, and many other places. However, there are other sources of pain as well that are tearing communities apart and keeping new, constructive, and useful things from happening, including the support of the indigenous languages. In my view, efforts to stabilize indigenous languages must be linked to work on healing in communities. It is through healing practices that we can uncover not only ways to soothe the pain and counteract negativity, but also ways to support, talent, skills, leadership, and wisdom that is so greatly needed for language, culture, and community survival and development.

Final word

I appreciate greatly the opportunity to communicate my thoughts to the readers of this book. It encouraged me to see that there are so many who have made the trip to the Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium in Flagstaff, Arizona, to learn and to share what they have learned. Leadership has clearly come forward in many communities in order to produce the ideas and interests that were brought to Flagstaff. Now, I think, a new leadership is starting, one of people who can take the skills and knowledge they have developed at home and share them with other communities and other language groups. This is a new stage, a broader, more hopeful stage. Although it may not seem that we have accomplished very much so far, we just need to look back a few years to see that a great deal has been done. Where once there was nothing but the prospect of indigenous language loss, there are now programs, and teachers, and writing systems, and books, and radio programs, and young people learning, and, most of all, the beginnings of a new respect for indigenous languages. We are fortunate to have a place in this process.

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